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ABSTRACT

The Personal Learning Plan project described in this report was developed as a way to supplement the advising system at Rhode Island College by giving students a written document of their academic progress throughout their college careers. The overall purpose is to improve retention by advising students on the best way for them to be successful in college and to achieve their goals for their college career. The Personal Learning Plan is 30 pages in length, with an additional 20 pages of appendices that feature time management charts, college-wide activities, and various college policy statements that are important for students. At the present time, nearly all freshmen receive a plan. The goal is to produce the original plan for all freshmen and then have it updated each year. The program has been modified in response to an external evaluation by assessment experts, and a larger external evaluation is scheduled. (KM)

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PERSONAL LEARNING PLAN

Rhode Island College

ED306885

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AASCU/ERIC Model Programs Inventory Project

The AASCU/ERIC Model Programs Inventory is a two-year project seeking to establish and test a model system for collecting and disseminating information on model programs at AASCU-member institutions--375 of the public four-year colleges and universities in the United States.

The four objectives of the project are:

- To increase the information on model programs available to all institutions through the ERIC system
- To encourage the use of the ERIC system by AASCU institutions
- To improve AASCU's ability to know about, and share information on, activities at member institutions, and
- To test a model for collaboration with ERIC that other national organizations might adopt.

The AASCU/ERIC Model Programs Inventory Project is funded with a grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education to the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, in collaboration with the ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education at The George Washington University.

ABSTRACT

The Personal Learning Plan project developed as a way to supplement the advising system at Rhode Island College by giving students a written document of their academic progress throughout their college career. The Personal Learning Plan is 30 pages in length with an additional 20 pages of appendices that feature time management charts, college-wide activities and various other college policy statements that would be important for students to have handy. At the present time nearly all freshmen receive a plan, however, the goal for the future is to produce the original plan for all freshmen and then have it updated each year. The overall purpose of the project is to improve retention by advising students on the best way for them to be successful and achieve their goals in college.

INTRODUCTION

To our current knowledge, Rhode Island College is the only institution in the country which produces written learning plans for the majority of the general population of its students. The computer program which is designed to create the text for each individual student is unique and specific to the needs and issues applicable to Rhode Island College students. The students are mostly all commuters, work long hours in on and off campus jobs, are first generation college students with family units who enjoy their attention and do not always understand their son or daughters' college goals. Since the student have many demands placed upon them and because they do not always take advantage of face to face advising with their academic advisor, the college believed that a written document could supplement and enhance student contact with the college.

Another purpose of the project involves value added assessment. Rhode Island College has had a commitment to value added research since 1982 when it became involved in a consortium of colleges and universities that addressed value added assessment under the guidance of Dr. Alexander Astin.

Value added assessment is a way of assessing the growth and development of students over time and the plans are a good of following students as well as being used as valuable information for curricula review and advising (cf. Astin, 1985, 1982; Chimezie, 1985; Whitla, 1981, 1977).

Data which is gathered through a system such as the learning plan allows students to receive the benefit of first hand advice and permits the institution access to the creation of a substantial data base. Also, the college is able to determine ways in which it can study various patterns demonstrated by students (i.e. work patterns; part-time, full-time patterns; campus activity patterns).

The benefit of the advice to students is considerable. Time management is a favorite section of the Personal Learning Plan for most students. They also appreciate the analysis of their strengths and areas of concern and the referrals that are made for them to seek help at other support centers on campus.

The plan consist of fine major sections: time management, academic strengths and concerns; study habits, work plans, and activities on campus. Students answer an interactive computer questionnaire during the summer orientation and it consists of these five sections. The specific answers that the student gives to this questionnaire

are what creates his or her plan.

BACKGROUND

The students at Rhode Island College have a number of different demands placed upon them from being full-time college students who commute to campus, workers in part or full-time jobs, and members of families where they are first generation college students. Education often takes a second place to all of these other commitments and for good reasons. Off campus employment and commuting take a lot of time away from students participation in their academics and it leaves virtually no time for student involvement in campus activities. Long hours of work which were habitual and often unrewarding in high school are now the patterns seen in the college student. When something must be dropped from a student's busy schedule, typically it is a class. Students fall behind in courses and often just totally fade out of the college. It is not necessarily the fault of the student; it is the fault of the college for not making an extra effort to retain their students.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PERSONAL LEARNING PLAN

The Personal Learning Plan give advice on an individualized basis to each student. It is an approximately 80 page document within a large white binder with a personalized cover on it. Freshmen receive the plan at the

beginning of their first year and they are told to take it to their academic advisor or someone else on campus to discuss its content.

The goal of the project is to give additional advice to students about the best way for them to keep their academic goals a priority. It is meant to supplement and strengthen the present advising and support system structure that presently exists at the college. Students are always encouraged to take their plan to an advisor or to attend one of the Personal Learning Plan workshops and discuss their plan in a group. Human contact is needed and is vital for the success of this project.

The project has one full time assessment director who serves as Assistant to the Provost at the college, one full-time secretary out of the Division of Academic Affairs, one full-time technical director and approximately twelve students who are employed in an advisory capacity. The Personal Learning Plan project is presently funded for approximately $93,000 a year under the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education. Ways are being investigated at the moment to institutionalize the project.

RESULTS

So far the Personal Learning Plans have had a wide acceptance among the 1500 students who have received them. A

telephone survey was conducted of a quarter of the students who received the first plans in fall, 1987. In general, students surveyed said they read their plan and they were pleased with being given additional advice, particularly on time management. Some students felt the advice was too critical.

In spring, 1987 two outside experts in assessment, Dr. Alexander Astin and Dr. Trudy Banta, visited the college and evaluated the projects progress. Various changes occurred after their visit, including a change with the questionnaire and an elimination of the assessment instrument, the ACT-COMP EXAM. A larger team of eight professional evaluators will assess the project in February, 1989. The team will include Dr. Astin and Dr. Banta, along with others who are nationally known in assessment. One team member will be a technical expert who will evaluate the technical part of the project.

The project's results are constantly being measured through student feedback on surveys and observations on their use of the plan. A Student Advisory Committee helps to provide ongoing feedback.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Results have demonstrated the success of the Personal Learning Plan project so far. It was a needed effort at the

college because of concerns with the retention rate of students. It has sparked considerable interest in value added assessment and it has a spin-off project called the Student Potential Program which has had just as much success with using the McBer Behavioral Event Interview.

The recommendations for the future include earlier dates for distribution of the Personal Learning Plan to freshmen (a good time would be the first two weeks of school in September) and a polishing of the language in the plan (less critical, more supportive). Future goals also include an update of the plan to go to each student every year.